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Legalize school dress code

Uniforms could help improve student behavior

Gov. Pete Wilson has on his desk a bill that has received relatively little attention. But to parents, administrators, teachers and others committed to improving California's public schools, the measure by Sen. Phil Wyman, R-Tehachapi, is very important.

Wyman's bill would allow schools, with the approval of local school boards, to require that students wear uniforms. The actual decision would be left to individual school districts. But it would empower all districts to require uniforms if they are deemed necessary for the "health and safety of the school environment."

Wyman's measure is supported by rural and urban schools, along with the California School Boards Association and the California Parent Teachers Association. It sailed through the Legislature because it generally is viewed as a good way to improve discipline both in and out of the classroom.

The bill flows from the premise that students who wear uniforms are more apt to behave and thereby improve their academic performance. And, as Wyman says, it also "can provide a neutral coat of arms against gang colors and against gang intimidation of students."

In fact, Wyman drafted his bill largely at the prodding of students and school personnel in his district. They had grown increasingly weary of battles between students that were prompted, deliberately or unintentionally, by the wearing of

certain colors favored by rival gangs.

Last year, the Legislature passed a law that allows schools to ban gang-related apparel. Wyman's bill dovetails with that measure by enabling school districts to adopt a dress code that treats all students alike.

It stands to reason that students who spend less time worrying about making a fashion statement or flashing gang colors are more likely to concentrate on their education. A collateral benefit is that parents won't have to shell out so much money for their kids' clothes.

Under Wyman's measure, schools would be required to give six months' notice of their uniform policy and to find a way to provide uniforms for students who could not afford them. Parents, students and school staff would be involved in the process of selecting a uniform. And parents who declined to abide by the dress code for religious, economic or other reasons could opt out of the requirement, with the district's permission.

Parochial schools long have required their students to wear uniforms and with good results. Public schools, including a few in the San Diego area, also have had positive results with voluntary dress codes.

The beauty of Wyman's bill is that it enhances the power of local schools by giving districts the authority to implement a policy they believe to be in the best interests of students. Gov. Wilson should sign it into law.